

[\[Link to audio recording.\]](#)

When I was in high school, I was in a production of Godspell. As time goes on, you'll hear me mention that again because there are lots of passages in the Bible that I just can't hear any more without picturing my friends and classmates acting them out!

This is one of those times: the parable of the rich man.

In my mind, I see my friend Jill really hamming it up. And man, does this parable call for some exaggerated behavior.

Parables are stories designed to teach us something about God and about ourselves and they often employ exaggeration, repetition, or other rhetorical devices to make their point. In the case of this morning's reading, imagine it with a bit of tongue-in-cheek acting.

This rich man has SO MUCH stuff, so much wealth, that he doesn't even have enough room to store it all. And so he processes this dilemma outloud: "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?...I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."¹

I just love this visual. I mean, most of us talk to ourselves, at least in our mind, right? When we're figuring out a puzzle or running through the pros and cons of making a decision...but this rich man is so *certain*, so *self-assured*, that he has everything figured out and figured out correctly. Too much stuff? Just build more barns! Simple solution!

In my time with our youngest members just a few minutes ago, I talked about how God calls us to continually focus on the "we" over the "me." The more theologically savvy way of putting that is with the Latin phrase "incurvatus in se," or "turned in on oneself." Essentially, this is the notion that, because of sin, we are inclined to selfishness, navel-gazing, and focusing on ourself and our own needs, as opposed to the needs of our neighbors, or our relationships with our neighbors or God.

And this is on full display in the parable Jesus tells.

The rich man is completely in an echo chamber of their own thoughts and feelings. When faced with this "problem"—can we even call so much wealth a problem?—when faced with this "problem," the only person he consults is himself. "Soul?" he asks, or "self," depending on the translation. Basically, it's a case confirmation bias. This man is not *wanting* to share what he has, so he only asks someone who will have the same opinion on what to do with his excess as he does—himself!

1. Luke 12:17-19.

But God calls us to more. Of course, we shouldn't *ignore* our own thoughts and feelings, but being a person a faith means that we *also* are concerned with others. Can you imagine what would happen in this parable if the rich man asked his neighbors what he should do with his excess wealth?

Maybe his neighbor Sue would have reminded him that Miriam's husband died and now she and her children were among the widows relying on others to survive.

Maybe Frank down the road would have pointed out that his fields haven't produced nearly as much as he'd planned and his family will be facing a lean year ahead.

Heck, maybe another neighbor would have said, "Hey, I've got some extra space in my barns—why don't you store some stuff here and we can work together to distribute it to those who need it!"

Because it isn't the rich man's wealth *itself* that is the problem. It is the fact that it has become an idol for him, something that is causing him to ignore the community around him, that is causing him to care only about himself. And it is in the midst of that selfishness and greed that God comes to him to tell him his life is being demanded of him.

That's an interesting thing about this parable—God is actually a named character. In most parables (I'm tempted to say all, but I wasn't able to go back and check every one), the characters are representative and we are left, as the hearers, to assign roles. I like this a lot! It leaves room for ambiguity and flexibility and different ways of understanding the parable. But in this one, we are actually told *who* God is and what God says.

And what God says is...not the most comforting: "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"²

Whew.

The rich man's life is being demanded of him and so all of his grand plans are for naught. Now, we don't know why his life is being demanded of him or who or what is demanding his, only that it is. And because it is, God asks the question that maybe the rich man should have been asking all along: "the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

God is *forcing* the issue, *forcing* the rich man to think about more than himself, after he option of what to do with his wealth has been taken away from him.

2. Luke 12:20.

Our levels of wealth in this congregation are not all the same. We all have different incomes and lifestyles and circumstances that impact our finances and how we feel about them. And so when we read this text, it's usually hard for us to identify as the rich man because I doubt there are many of us who have *so much* wealth and money that our biggest problem is what to do with it all. That's an Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos problem and I think scripture has quite a few things to say about that.

However, I do think there is a word here for the rest of us, whatever level of wealth we may have.

Jesus tells this parable after someone asks him to intervene in a family conflict: "Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."³ We don't know how much of an inheritance we're talking about, and Jesus doesn't seem to care. He basically just says, "That's not what I'm here to do—but while we're on the topic of money, let's talk about greed." In other words, "Why do you want this money so badly? Let's talk about what selfishness and greed gets you."

So, we know that it's not just about massive amounts of money. It's about the love of money, the love of self, over love of our neighbor.

As disciples of Christ, we are called to be on guard against *incurvatus in se*, against turning in on ourselves, against turning from "we" to "me."

That means that whatever we do with our resources, whether that be financial, ecological, spiritual, or material, while our tendency might be to just ask *ourselves* what is best, God desires that we ask our neighbors, that we ask our community, that we even ask *God*, the way forward.

What are we missing when we're only concerned with our own bottom line?

Are we missing the hungry in our midst?

Are we missing the impact our choices have on the environment?

Are we missing a gap in local social services?

Could it be that the things we are tempted to store up for ourselves could actually have an impact in ways we could never have imagined, if only we're paying attention and ready to share?

All it takes, is continually and consciously asking the questions. Turning from "me" to "we."

Amen.

3. Luke 12:13.